



# Middle East Studies

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## U.S., Israel and Arab Gulf Perceptions of Iranian Threats

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The United States, Israel, the Gulf states, much of the rest of the Arab world, and many other regional powers perceive Iran as a current or potential threat.[1] Their perceptions do differ sharply, however, in terms of risk, priority, and probability, and they evolve along with changes in Iran's behavior, military forces, and nuclear capabilities. Moreover, perceptions differ within given countries, and there are often serious differences between popular and media perceptions and those of military planners and national security elites.

Every country has its own hawks and doves, and its perceptions of the Iranian threat are heavily influenced by each country's domestic political debates. Talking about nominal threat perceptions of given countries must focus on broad trends and what key officials, officers, and experts perceive — not on the full range of different national views. Public, media, think tank, and open political debates all have an impact on national perceptions. However, such perceptions are based on positions and information that differ sharply from that of the planners, analysts, and policymakers who have access to sensitive classified information and actually have to deal with the Iranian threat. Accordingly, it is possible to speculate on the details of national perceptions, but an examination of what is said publicly is in no sense a reliable picture of how policy makers actually perceive the Iranian threat in any detail.

These points make it dangerous to generalize about "national" perceptions, when the perceptions of given Americans, Israelis and groups in other countries can differ so sharply. However, to the extent it is possible to generalize about mainstream public perceptions, it is clear that the United States and Israel often see Iran from a different perspective. Further complicating this is the fact that Arab views often publicly take the opposite position of those in Washington and Tel Aviv, with claims of friendship with Tehran, but hold private views that Iran is a growing threat that must be dealt with.

### MES Notes

#### MES 2011-12 Lecture Series

MES at MCU is hosting a Lecture Series throughout the 2011-2012 Academic Year entitled "Orienting our Sights on the Future: The Opportunities and Challenges of the Arab Revolts".

The sixth lecture in the series will be presented by Mr. David Shenker on 29 March 2012 at 1330 and is entitled "Winter or Spring: Islamists, the Military, and Post-Revolution Politics in Egypt."

Further information and resources are available at: <http://www.mcu.usmc.mil>, under the Middle East Studies tab or via Facebook at: [middleeaststudies.mcu](http://middleeaststudies.mcu).

POC for the MES Lecture Series is Mr. Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or [seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu](mailto:seitzac@grc.usmcu.edu).

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## Perceptions of the Iranian Nuclear and Missile Threat

Although most governments and experts perceive Iran's nuclear and missile programs as directed towards giving Iran nuclear weapons and nuclear armed missiles, there are few indications that Americans, Europeans, or the Gulf states perceive this threat as "existential," or assign it anything approaching the same sense of urgency as Israel. They see this aspect of the Iranian threat more as a way that Iran can increase its strategic leverage and influence, increase its ability to intimidate and exert political pressure, and deter any military action against Iran in the face of a confrontation or crisis. While there is no consensus among the actors involved, many are more likely than their Israeli counterparts to believe that Iran is containable and deterrable through a mix of steps like missile defenses and regional extended deterrence.

U.S. and European policymakers also act on the perception that the Iranian threat should be dealt with through options like sanctions and negotiations if this is at all possible. Although the U.S. perceives the possible need for military options, it also recognizes that most European countries do not, and it will face major political and diplomatic problems in getting both European and Arab Gulf support unless there is some "smoking gun" in the form of unambiguous new evidence that Iran is developing nuclear weapons on a schedule that makes this necessary.

Although they make it clear that military options remain on the table, U.S. President Barack Obama has noted there are serious risks in trying to contain an Iran that does have nuclear weapons, and key U.S. political and military leaders have publicly voiced their opposition to any near-term strikes on a number of occasions, warning of the destabilizing effect such an option would have in the region, as well as the potential impact on the ongoing U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

Israeli perceptions of the Iranian nuclear threat take on special meaning because of the risk of Israel carrying out a preventive or preemptive strike against Iran. There is little doubt that most Israelis — both at the public and official levels — perceive Iran's nuclear programs as directed towards producing nuclear weapons that will be deployed on long-range missiles and aimed at Israel. Senior Israeli officials and officers have repeatedly made it clear that they fear this will pose an "existential" threat to Israel in the sense that even one major nuclear strike on a city like Tel Aviv would produce enough casualties and damage to threaten Israel's cohesion as a state. Such factors have led Israeli officials and defense planners to focus heavily on the threat posed by Iran's missiles — which already have potential maximum ranges that put any target in Israel within range.

While most Israeli officials would prefer diplomatic solutions — or to have the U.S. take military action — at least some perceive the threat as so serious in broad terms that they are prepared to strike preventively or preemptively to deny Iran the option. It is difficult to know, however, whether Israel is actually ready for such a strike or is using such views — and the threat of preventive strikes — as a political tool in pressuring Iran to give up its nuclear efforts, and the U.S. and other nations to support steadily greater political pressure and sanctions. It seems likely that Israel's top political and military leaders will only act *if* they feel they have no choice, and *if* the Israeli Defense Force concludes such strikes will be effective and produce acceptable costs in return for U.S. and other international interventions. These two *ifs*, however, are seen as critical issues and present no clear consensus on supporting an Israeli attack at any level in Israel.

Moreover, some Israeli — as well as some outside — experts disagree on whether the extent of Iran's threat to Israel is more than rhetoric, or whether Iran would risk attacking a nuclear-armed Israel. Some feel that Iran finds Israel to be a convenient stalking horse and way of justifying a massive military and missile build-up that is primarily intended to give Iran leverage over the Gulf and its other neighbors and limit U.S. military freedom of action.

Such differences in perceptions are further complicated by major uncertainties surrounding Iran's nuclear program — such as the number and location of facilities, how resistant underground facilities are to given methods of attacks, and the speed at which Iran's nuclear program is advancing in a number of areas. As such, any discussion of relative perceptions of any aspect of the Iranian threat has to be kept in careful perspective. Key data are lacking, uncertain, or disputed. Perceptions of future trends in Iran's actions range from potential worst cases to diplomatic success and claims that Iran either is not pursuing nuclear weapons or will reverse its course.

## Perceptions of the Iranian Asymmetric Threat

Gulf, U.S., European, and Israeli threat perceptions also focus — to varying degrees — on the broader range of Iranian threats. These include the threats posed by Iran’s ties to Syria, its role in Afghanistan, and its broader role in Central Asia. Arab states like Egypt and Jordan have expressed their concern over the potential threat posed by Iran’s relations with Syria and the creation of a “Shiite crescent” that includes Lebanon and could come to include Iraq.

While all of these concerns are shared in broad terms by the U.S., most Gulf states, and Israel, they are given different priorities based on “national” threat perceptions. The Gulf states and the U.S. feel more concerned with Iran’s influence in Iraq and the Gulf than Israel, while Israel feels more threatened by Iran’s links to Hizballah and its role in Lebanon. Even so, the Gulf states are far more sensitive to the asymmetric threats that Iran poses to their territory and petroleum exports than even most U.S. policymakers and national security analysts.

Moreover, Gulf leaders, military officials, and intelligence experts focus more on Iran’s ability to use specialized forces like the Qods Force and key elements of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), as much as its “conventional” forces in asymmetric ways and irregular warfare. This focus has been strongly reinforced in recent months by events in Bahrain, as well as the perception by many Gulf leaders that Iran has supported the Houthi rebels in Yemen and is seeking dominant influence in Iraq by influencing its Shiite political leaders. This raises problems for every Arab Gulf state with a Shiite population — especially in a Bahrain whose Sunni leaders are struggling with unrests from its Shiite-majority. This increases the risk of broader tension and clashes between Shiites and Sunnis throughout the Muslim world.

Finally, while the U.S. and European leaders share many of the concerns of the Gulf states and Israel about the threat Iran poses to the security of the Middle East and Gulf region, they must also focus on role of Iran in Afghanistan and the potential destabilizing effects it could have on ongoing operations in this theater. While Iran’s role has so far been more positive than negative — for example, Iran is now the main transit route for UN food aid to Afghanistan — Iran has also provided some support to extremist groups and could become a far more serious problem if it chooses to be one.

### MES Notes (cont.)

12 February 2012

Dr. Amin Tarzi presented a lecture entitled “Prospects for Peace and Reconciliation in Afghanistan: A Regional Outlook” at The College of New Jersey.

## Perceptions of the Iranian Conventional Threat

The U.S., Britain, France, and Arab Gulf states focus far more on Iran’s conventional capabilities than Israel. Israel has only limited interest in the Iranian conventional threat, as Iran does not pose any meaningful conventional land or naval threat to Israel, and has no real capability to use its strike aircraft against Israel with conventional weapons.

Although Iran’s land and naval forces appear to present a serious regional threat on paper, they are aging, of low to moderate capability, and lack modernization, due in large part to Iran’s inability to import advanced modern arms on the scale required to shift the balance. In spite of constant propaganda claims to the contrary, Iran has as yet been unable to create national defense industries that can produce the range of systems required.

At the same time, however, Iran does have large forces that it can use to supplement the forces it is developing for asymmetric warfare, and it has enough mass to make any U.S. invasion of Iran problematic at best. Iran’s conventional naval forces are large enough to present a challenge during the initial phases of any major clash, and they include submarines and minelayers, as well as advanced mines that can be delivered by any surface vessel. Its air and surface-based air defense forces may be aging and weak, but they can still have an effect, and can be used to selectively raid and attack targets in the Gulf region.

Moreover, the U.S. invasion of Iraq stripped away Iraq's capability to deter and defend against Iran and act as a regional counterbalance. The U.S., Britain and France, and the Gulf states are, therefore, confronted with at least a decade in which they must maintain enough conventional forces in the Gulf and credible surge capabilities to deter and defend against the full spectrum of the Iranian threat to the Gulf region. They must again focus on building up southern Gulf forces that can deal with the same spectrum of threats, compete with Iran for influence in Iraq, and create Iraqi security forces that can both provide internal security and deter and defend against Iran.

### **Dynamics of U.S. and Israeli Threat Perceptions**

Far too often, the rhetoric of alliance disguises real differences in national interest, while the rhetoric of politics exaggerates them. The U.S. and Israel share a common perception that Iran is a threat, they have agreed Iran is at the point where it has all the technology to produce nuclear weapons, and they agree that Iran could probably deploy nuclear-armed missiles within three years if its programs are not halted and a common focus on the threat posed by Iran's long-range missiles and potential nuclear capabilities. They do, however, have different priorities and perceptions of this aspect of the Iranian threat. They share some perceptions of the asymmetric threat but have a fundamentally different focus and set of concerns and priorities.

The U.S., Israel, Arab Gulf states, and other outside powers all face the problem that today's threat perceptions are based on very limited ability to project Iran's force plans and capabilities in the future. While Iran and Israel are already beginning the equivalent of a nuclear arms race, the scale and nature of this race will only be clear when — and if — Iran actually acquires and deploys nuclear armed forces.

The U.S. and Israel agree that the risks are so high that they must plan for a military option, and the U.S. seems to be less and less confident that containment is an option. At the same time, Israel and the U.S. have a different sense of urgency and different strategic priorities. They also very different capabilities both to strike and to wait out Iran's creation of more hidden and sheltered facilities, and different perceptions of the risk of exercising military options. However, many key details of U.S. and Israeli intelligence assessments and war plans are so classified that there is no way to estimate how their threat perceptions will be translated into either specific military options or their future willingness to exercise them.

Seen broadly, this means that the U.S., Israel, the Arab Gulf states, a range of state and non-state actors, and Iran are all playing the equivalent of three dimensional chess from different positions on the board. They also are playing a game where the key pieces are always in constant motion, where they can only see part of the moves of other players, where it is often unclear who is an ally or adversary in any given part of the game, and where both the game boards and rules constantly change and evolve. The only thing that is certain is that the U.S. and Israel should cooperate as fully as they can, understand they have different needs as well as many common interests, and they only way to win is to accept the sheer complexity, uncertainty, and full range of risks in playing an extraordinarily dangerous game.

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#### **Notes:**

[1] For a detailed analysis of the evolving Iranian threat, see Anthony H. Cordesman and Alexander Wilner, "Iran and the Gulf Military Balance I: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions," <http://csis.org/publication/iran-and-gulf-military-balance-i-conventional-and-asymmetric-dimensions>; and "Iran and the Gulf Military Balance II: The Missile and Nuclear Dimensions," <http://csis.org/publication/iran-and-gulf-military-balance-ii-missile-and-nuclear-dimensions>.